JESUS CHRIST FOR MODERN MAN
THE MAN
Mark - selected

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

March 2, 1975

Several years ago my wife and I attended a Good Friday night Tenebrae Service, an ancient liturgy to observe the passion and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It was held in a large down-town church; the music was excellent; the components of the service had been chosen with greatest care. We felt that the Church had appropriately and beautifully observed the central event of her existence. There were no more than fifty people present, scattered throughout the huge sanctuary. Nevertheless, it was a good experience and we were glad we had taken the time to attend.

Then, on the way home, we drove past a shopping center where a carnival was in full process. The traffic was horrendous; policemen were frantically trying to make room for all the cars that insisted on squeezing into the already over-crowded lot. The lights of the ferris wheel and other amusements shone garishly against the Good Friday night sky; an over-amplified rock tune pushed the strains of J. S. Bach from my mind; and the hundreds of people lined up to throw balls at bottles or rings over pegs, to buy snow cones and cotton candy compared inevitably with that pitiful number who had remembered a crucifixion an hour before. My emotions - already on edge from the beauty of Tenebrae - turned to anger. And I could not help but recall that oft-quoted line from Lamentations, "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?"

For some reason that experience has stayed with me as a kind of parable, a sequential picture story that defines the agony of a Christian in our culture. There is no more important day for us

than Good Friday: we take it seriously: we know that Easter is coming but Good Friday is a strange, introspective, sometimes sad day for sensitive people. But no one seems to care. Life goes on. The market place bustles and people choose the occasion to take a ride on a ferris wheel.

The whole experience came to mind again this week, but in a different way. I was reading through a little book written by J. B. Phillips, the great British Churchman and scholar. Listen to what he wrote,

> "The significance and meaning of the crucifixion of Christ is completely lost upon the non-Christian of today... It is not because of mere heartlessness or sinfulness that the cross, which is so important to Christians, means nothing to them that pass by. It is far simpler than that: they have not the slightest idea of what the Christian faith really says about God and Man." (p 171 Good News)

Phillips goes on to suggest that it is true, also, for Churchmen. Familiarity may not always breed contempt, but it does generate a certain apathy. Perhaps we have heard the story so often that it has lost its cutting impact. Perhaps we sophisticated twentieth century church people have been so caught up in thinking about the implications and relevance of things Christian that we have forgotten about the "things" themselves.

That is at least one way to understand what has been happening religiously in our culture for almost a decade now. We have tried desperately and valiantly to be relevant: we have spoken our wisdom to every societal problem, every sociological crisis that has happened: name a problem and the odds are that the institutional Church has a Task Force somewhere studying it. Please understand: I am in no way opposed to the institutional Church's involvement in the world - our mission is in the world and we are called to be in the world, in the name of Jesus Christ, with as much sophistication and power and influence as we can muster. But a very curious phenomenon has been happening. Growing numbers of people, particularly the young, have watched us for a decade and have said eloquently, "Your relevance is irrelevant," and they have flocked back to the Bible, back to the simple story of a man who lived and died and rose again. They have gathered under various banners - few of them connected with the Church.

And if that evidence is not enough, take it from the sociologists: the ones who, a decade ago, solemly pronounced that we are now, finally a secular society; and the theologians who could not wait to be relevant by agreeing and pronouncing that "man has come of age." Behold, we have looked again and discovered that secular man was, in fact, superficial man and that he is not really very secular after all.

A professor at Yale Divinity School read the pulse of the times several years ago and said, "Just when we had almost convinced ourselves and one another of the ubiquity and permanence of secularism, suddenly we have the Jesus Movement, Jesus People, Jesus freaks, Jesus highs, even a Jesus revolution. If we turn on the

radio we find Jesus in the hands of the disc jockeys and high on the charts, and literally within minutes someone will be informing us plaintively, ('I don't know how to love Him',) or counseling, ('put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee.') If we watch a football game on television we hear an opening prayer, ('In the name of Jesus, the MVP of all time'.) (Thesis Theological Cassettes Vol.2, No. 11)

And of course there is the strange phenomenon of Jesus, after 2,000 years, finally making it on Broadway. "Superstar" grossed $20 million in the first year, and along with "Godspell"celebrated and told the story of Jesus more widely than the most fervent missionary's wildest dream.

Religion, in various packages - most of them offensive to our sense of propriety, has never been ~~better~~ hotter. I discovered a revealing editorial in the current Christian Century, on Theological Seminaries. The writer observed, "Much theological education in the 60's assumed as fact the 'worldliness' of the period - assumed that people were 'beyond belief'. The irony is the recognition that the world is more 'religious' than the seminaries understood... The problem is not one of doing theology for a religionless time, but of doing theology in a time of growing religiousness." (Cristian Century 2/5/75, p 102)

I submit that at least part of the reason for the current religious situation is that the institutional church - came very close in the past decade - forgetting its story - ~~that story that was~~ Not to say that we should not be involved - only - that our worldly involvement must always reflect what we believe about a man by the name of Jesus.

When all is said and done, we exist as a Church because of a story, the story of a man who lived and died and rose again, a story which we have found makes all the difference in the world and which we would like to share with others. Thus in Lent - a series of sermons: "Jesus Christ for Modern Man." We begin this morning with "The Man."

He was born in Bethlehem: he grew through boyhood, adolescense to manhood in Nazareth. He was a carpenter. At the age of thirty

he began to travel around Galilee with some friends, teaching, healing and consistantly running into trouble with the religious authorities. After no more than three years of this he took his small entourage of followers south to Jerusalem for the Passover. In five short days he was routinely executed near a garbage dump outside the city along with two other criminals. Thirty eight hours later his friends began to claim that he was no longer dead. Several weeks later they seemed sure of it and the world has never been the same since.

Who was he? Twenty centeries of Church history, that is- two thousand years of asking the question - has resulted in the venerable doctrine of the Incarnation, the keystone to Christian faith. He was fully God and fully man. He was God incarnate, God in the Flesh, God in history, God walking among us. He was, also, at the same time, fully and totally a man. The incarnation - that is what we believe about him that is how we understand him. It is, philosophically, a paradox - logically incompatible. One cannot be God and man; God acting like a man, perhaps: a man, acting like God, perhaps: but not both, at the same time. Nevertheless; that is precisely the truth about him, the church maintains. He is not to be understood: it will never be understood in ordinary categories of logic: it is to be affirmed and celebrated, and the tension maintained. He was God. He was a man. And the truth about him is incomplete when the tension is broken - which is exactly what happened no more than a century after his life, and which continues to happen.

Within one hundred years of the crucifixion the early Christians were on the way toward denying his humanity. He only "seemed to be a man" they said. He was God pretending to be a man. Human nature

(*) Books which pursue it are inevitably controversial - we share, I think, the reluctance of the 1st cent. Arians - to deal honestly with his humanity

was simply a disguise God put on - and took off, of course, before Jesus died on the cross. That earliest heresy has recurred through the centuries. It appears whenever we back away from the sometimes alarming implications of his humanity, when we can't imagine that he was in every way one of us. (+)

At the opposite end of the spectrum there has always been a certain intellectual appeal in the position that he was a very good man, perhaps the best man who ever lived, an excellent teacher and a brave martyr - but not God.

My estimation is that we do not go to either of those extremes but in the best tradition of thesis - antithesis - synthesis take the two statements - he was God - he was man - combine them and come out with something in between: a person neither fully human nor quite divine. That appears to me to be the innuendo expressed in what is known as Sunday School art. The Jesus in the picture frame looks slightly effeminate, unreal, not God, but certainly not man either. Robert Clyde Johnson in his little book, The Meaning of Christ, calls him "velvety", more at home with little lambs than a hammer and saw. Swinburn, the poet, referred to him as the "Pale Galilean".

He was a man, totally and fully, with all that implies. Ancient manuscripts show that before the end of the first century many stories were told and written about the supernatural childhood of Jesus; how he restored a favorite pet to life for instance. None of them made it into the Bible, however, For the Biblical writers understood that the heart of the Gospel was the astounding assertion that Jesus, who was God dwelling in the flesh was totally and fully a man.

Sometimes we find that uncomfortable to contemplate. It means that

he was a child, that he had to learn to walk; that he was scolded by his parents. It means that he talked the language of his ~~parents~~ Mother & Father - a rough Aramaic. It means that he saw the world through the eyes of a first century man. He thought the earth was flat, and had no reason to doubt that the firmament above him was in fact an inverted cup; holding back the waters. Jesus was as limited by his humanity as we are by our own.

It means that he experienced the same things emotionally and physically as we do. He felt joy and happiness: he liked people and enjoyed a party: he felt the same tension between his conscience and his desire to impress his friends that we do. He became angry and discouraged. He got tired and hungry and thirsty. When he suffered, he suffered as we would under the circumstances.

When he died, he did so trusting God, but he died a very human death. His anguish has been ~~preserved~~ preserved in the words from the cross which the early church remembered. ("I thirst") "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me". "It is finished". Those are very human words from the lips of a dying man.

God has dwelt among us in a life that was fully human: that is the miracle - the ancient truth that somehow is dulled. Jesus was our brother.

Chad Walsh put it this way: "Christ was God fully entering into the human condition and paying the price of that condition. God was not like some wealthy visitor from the right side of the tracks who schedules a brief tour through the slums to distribute Thanksgiving baskets. He made his home in the slums and endured everything."

The implications of Jesus' manhood are many. I should like briefly to focus on two. First, because Jesus was fully human, human life is supremely dignified and enobled. Human life is part of God's good creation. And even though the Greeks insisted that things physical were tainted and the noblest goal was to rise above the flesh, the body, the Christian faith roundly disagrees. Jesus lived life fully. And because he did, human life, our lives, are made holy. Our bodies are part of the goodness of God's creation: our needs and drives and appetites → ~~desires~~, not embarrasing remnants of our lower nature, but part of God's intent which Jesus himself experienced.

Second, the life of Jesus is what God means by human life. Jesus not only reveals the nature of God, he also reveals the glory and potential of man. He is what God created us to be. In his obedience and courage and faithfulness and integrity he shows us what God intended when he gave us the gift of life.

We need, you and I, a Lord who is real. And my concern this morning is really rather simple: it is that in our attempt to be relevant, in our effort to understand, and in our familiarity with the story, we may miss the basic and fundamental truth of the Gospel - namely, that Jesus Christ was a man, like us in every way.

I confess that I need that kind of Lord, and I would presume to suggest that you do too. We are intellectually curious about the theology of incarnation, about the nature of Christ; but our deepest need cries out for a reality we can feel as well as understand. God has answered - in a man: not a withdrawn mystic, but a strong man with callouses on his hands and muscles in his arms from hard work: God has anawered our deepest need, not in another-worldly

lakes and fish &c

visionary, but in a man who loved the world of flowers and mountains, and people, a man who passionately loved his own life. God has answered our need in a way every person can comprehend, in a man who had hopes and dreams and the courage to die with a beauty and dignity that defeated the ugliness and cruelty and inhumanity.

God was in Christ - and that man - Jesus - was our brother. Grasp that. Contemplate that. Live with that. Rejoice in that. Amen.

Father, we are grateful that in Jesus you have not only dwelt among us, but given us a brother, a friend, a picture of your intent for us. In this Lenten season, help us to see in him what you want us to be. Amen.